

By the Kansas Historical Society

Mary Elizabeth Lease The Populist Joan of Arc

Mary Elizabeth Lease, the voice of the Populist Party, was once described as "a tall, stately figure with a swinging stride of a girl athlete ... [and a] booming voice which ... set the men of Kansas wild with enthusiasm for a new leader."

Lease had many characteristics of a pioneer woman. She was steadfast, tough, and displayed great stamina. Lease was not satisfied with society's view of a woman's place in life. Mary Elizabeth Clyens was born in New York, the daughter of Irish immigrants. At the age of 15, just at the close of the Civil War, she began teaching in Pennsylvania. Unsatisfied with the low wages, she tried to organize teachers to demand more pay. When this failed she headed to Kansas where the wages were reported to be higher.



In 1873 she married Charles Lease, the owner of a drugstore and director of the Neosho County Bank. At this time the country was experiencing a depression that caused many bank closings and bankruptcies. The Leases were among those in trouble. They moved to Denison, Texas, where Lease gave birth to six children within 11 years. Two of these children died in infancy.

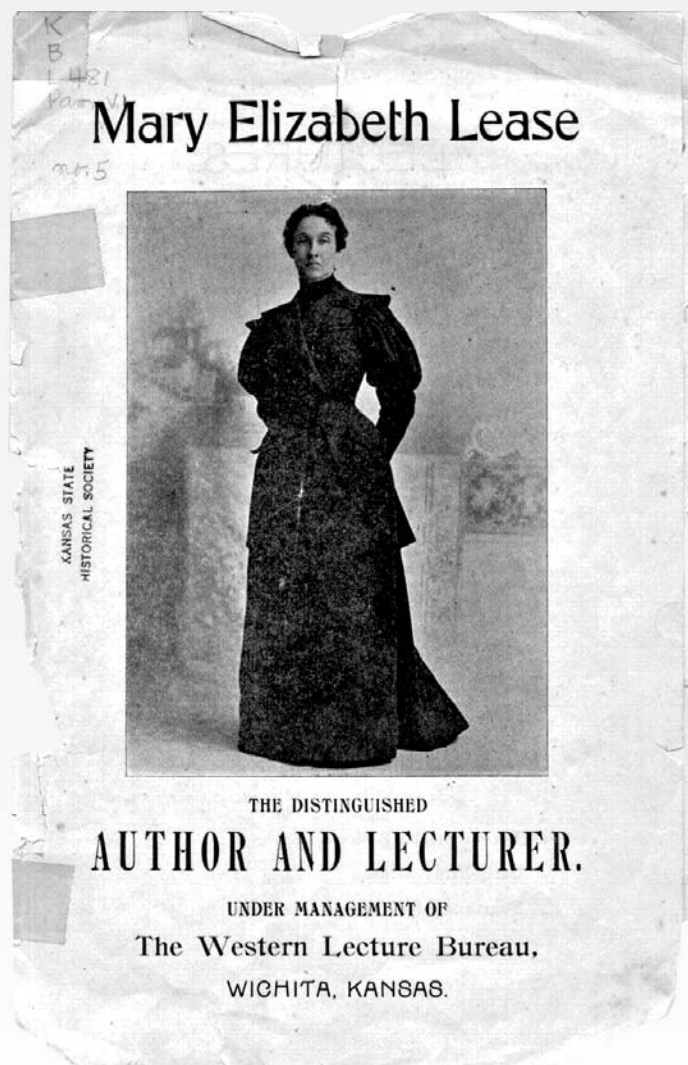
While busy raising a family, Lease continued to educate herself. When doing chores, such as washing dishes, she read newspaper articles pinned on the wall. She believed this allowed her to learn without wasting time. Soon she joined the Denison Woman's Christian Temperance Union, an organization that fought against the sale and use of alcohol. Lease believed alcohol destroyed families because men spent their paychecks on drink. Through this organization she spoke out against domestic violence. This marked Lease's first step toward a career as a lecturer and supporter for many causes.

By 1884 the Leases returned to Kansas. Lease described this experience:

Mr. Lease got an idea that we would do better on a farm, and we moved away out west, to Kingman County, and took up a claim. There I lived in the very midst of the desert, solitary, desolate, with no society save my children.

While living on the farm, Lease began to write articles for the local *Kingman County Citizen* newspaper. Her writings questioned the prevailing idea that women were intellectually inferior to men. She set out to prove her point by listing the achievements of many women. Her fame began to spread. The Leases soon traded the farm for property in Wichita. Lease continued to push her cause.

Soon Lease was a paid lecturer making appearances at Kansas rallies for temperance and women's suffrage [the right to vote]. The money from the lecture circuit helped her family survive. Lease was thrilled by the chance to capture and hold an audience's attention.



Are Women Inferior?

Originally the term "weaker sex" was intended to convey ... that in physical strength women are inferior to men. But the original meaning of the word ... has been enlarged ... to include the mind as well ... Many of them [men] do not hesitate to say that she fulfills her whole mission in the world when she makes herself as pretty and agreeable as possible. . . there is no gainsaying the fact that women have taken rapid strides in every branch of science and industry until it would be a much easier task to tell what women are not doing than to enumerate [list] what they are doing.

– Mrs. M. E. Lease, *Kingman County Citizen*,
January 31, 1884

Farmers began to form new organizations to improve their standard of living. One of these, the Farmers' Alliance, was concerned with the economic conditions of the United States. Lease soon joined that cause as well. The Alliance's first political action was a campaign to remove Kansas' U.S. senator John Ingalls from office. At this time senators were selected by the state legislature, not by the voters. Many Alliance members felt Ingalls was not representing the farmers or laborers. The organization set up a speakers' bureau to let voters know they were not supporting any candidate for state legislature who supported senator Ingalls.

Lease joined in the campaign, traveling hundreds of miles by stagecoach crisscrossing Kansas. Lease was a powerful speaker, sometimes giving two speeches a day. It was at a county convention that Lease proposed the list of candidates should rightly be called the "party of the people." Two months later, Lease gave the opening address at the state convention of the People's Party in Topeka.

She continued traveling the state denouncing Ingalls and blaming him for betraying the farmers. When the votes were counted, the Populists (People's Party) had won enough seats in the legislature to assure William Peffer's 1891 selection over Ingalls as U. S. senator.

Mary Lease became one of the Populists' favored spokespersons. Newspapers tagged her a modern Joan of Arc. She carried the Populist message across the nation — "a mortgaged home, an empty stomach and a ragged back knows no party." In Atlanta she was honored as the first woman to address the state legislature in Georgia.



Lease encouraged farmers nationwide to help defeat the Republican Party whom they blamed for the economic woes of the nation. "If you men will vote for principle once and quit voting for party, the victory will be ours."

In 1892 the Populist Party held a national convention to challenge the Republicans and Democrats. Lease was chosen as one of five delegates at large to represent Kansas. They nominated James B. Weaver of Iowa for president.



"You may call me an anarchist, a socialist, or a communist, I care not, but I hold to the theory that if one man has not enough to eat three times a day and another man has \$25,000,000, that last man has something that belongs to the first."

— Mary E. Lease

Sometimes Lease gave eight speeches a day with audiences as large as twelve thousand. The Populist Party gained momentum, but the race for presidency soon hit a brick wall. Reports accused Weaver of committing cruelties during the Civil War. By the time Weaver and Lease reached Atlanta, where she had been applauded months earlier, she was being called "raw-boned and ugly as a mud hen." Both were attacked on stage with a barrage of rotten eggs and vegetables. Unwilling to face further hostility, they returned to the Midwest.

Weaver received 10 percent of the popular vote nationwide, which was very high for a third party candidate. In Kansas Populists had more success. They elected Lorenzo Lewelling as governor and won many of the congressional seats. They also gained control of the state senate. Rumors quickly spread that Lease would be a candidate for U. S. Senate. Lawyers checked into the legality of a woman running for that office. She announced in the fall that she would not allow her name to be considered because it would not be good for party unity.

By 1894 Lease was becoming disillusioned with the Populist Party. In her opinion they had lost much of their identity. She accused the party leaders of being corrupt. Party unity was severely frayed. In 1896 the Democrats and Populists joined forces. Their presidential candidate was William Jennings Bryan. Although Lease campaigned for Bryan, she had lost her enthusiasm. Bryan was defeated by William McKinley. Lease was convinced that the unique party that had been "the farmer's rainbow of hope" was being destroyed.

In 1933 the famed Populist reformer and orator died.

Mary Elizabeth Lease
Once Populist Campaigner In Kansas,
Died Sunday New York, Oct. 30 (AP)

Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Lease, 83, an ardent campaigner in the ranks of the Populist party in Kansas more than 40 years ago, died Sunday at her home in Callicoon, N.Y.

Mrs. Lease, who in the later years of her active life, was a lecturer ... in the New York public schools, is survived by three children ...

– *The Emporia Gazette*, October 30, 1933

The Emporia Gazette editor William Allen White, a long-time opponent of Lease, wrote upon her death:

"She was an honest, competent woman who felt deeply and wielded great power unselfishly. Peace to her ashes."

